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WASHINGTON STAR

Hanoi Misled U.S. on Pullout In Viet Truce

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The U. S. Embassy in Saigon chose to believe Communist assurances that a truce would be arranged last April, rather than its own intelligence reports that the North Vietnamese intended to capture the city, according to official sources.

This acceptance of what appears to have been a deliberate Communist deception was a major element in the embassy's failure to make adequate preparations for the evacuation. Thousands of Vietnamese who had been promised that they would be taken out, as well as dozens of Americans, were left behind.

The assurances, which seemed to originate in Hanoi, said that the United States would be given a chance for an orderly withdrawal from Vietnam during a halt in fighting.

THE MESSAGE came through the Hungarian and Polish delegations to the International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS), which was created by the ineffective 1973 Vietnam cease-fire agreement. Attempts to confirm it through the Soviet Union yielded ambiguous answers that were taken by many officials as confirmation.

Officials in Washington made final preparations for a helicopter evacuation of Saigon on the basis of the intelligence reports. But they also gave some credence to the assurances, if not so much as Ambassador Graham A. Martin in Saigon did.

Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger said when the evacuation ended that until 24 hours before it started, "We thought there was some considerable hope that the North Vietnamese would not seek a solution by purely military means . . .We thought a negotiated solution in the next few days was highly probable."

But then, "The North Vietnamese obviously changed signals," Kissinger said.

Intelligence reports showed, however, that there was no change of signals. The Communists never intended to make any kind of deal. Those reports were substantiated by independent means more than a week before the final attack on Saigon and have since been verified by Communist statements.

THE PICTURE which emerges from a lengthy investigation of the last days of an Ameri[illegible] South Vietnam is one of confusion compounded by wishful thinking. Martin in Saigon as well as officials in Washington wanted to believe that the assurances of a dignified, arranged ending were true.

Martin was so convinced that right up to the final air raid and rocket attacks on Saigon, he was operating as if the war was about to halt.

Even after the 4 a.m. bombardment of Tan Son Nhut air base on the outskirts of Saigon which triggered the evacuation order from Washington, Martin told members of his staff that he could not understand what went wrong.

But all along, reports from intelligence agents of proven veracity had said the Communist high command intended to smash Saigon militarily. It planned to destroy any vestige of the Nguyen Van Thieu regime, rather than making any sort of deal with it or with the Americans whom the Communists linked with Thieu in undifferentiated hatred.

The confusion which surrounded the last American days was the kind of failure of intelligence evaluation —

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not collection, because the raw material was there — which had occurred many times earlier in the Vietnam and Cambodian wars. This time it had the excuse of the Communist deception about intentions.

THE ROLE of the Hungarians and Poles is unclear. It is impossible to learn whether they were deceived themselves by the Vietnamese Communists into thinking a deal might be arranged, or were informed parties to a plan to throw U. S. officials off balance by putting out a false story.

Some Americans who were involved in the high-level exchanges during the last few weeks of April believe the two Communist delegations were in on the plan. They also believe that the Soviet Union was a party to deceit, although several senior officials refuse to accept this.

Despite the initial furor in this country after the Saigon evacuation left many persons behind, there has been little public discussion of what happened. This suits the Ford administration. There has been a strong official desire just to forget about the whole mess.

President Ford set the tone at a news conference May 6, a week after the evacuation of Saigon ended. He was asked if he would welcome "a congressional inquiry into how we got in and how we got out of Vietnam."

"It would be unfortunate for us to rehash" what happened, Ford replied. "I think a congressional inquiry at this time would only be divisive and not helpful . . .The lessons of the past in Vietnam have already been learned...and we should have our focus on the future."

THERE HAVE BEEN half-hearted congressional attempts to probe the last days. Up to now they have been fended off by the unavailability of Martin, who has been ill, but now he has recovered and is on leave while the administration tries to figure out what to do with him.

Other officials who were in Saigon at the end have been dispersed to other jobs. The State Department and the Agency for International Development say they wanted to get them settled in new jobs, but there is a strong suspicion among many officials that Kissinger wanted to separate them in order to prevent too much comparing of recollections and mutterings about the way things were handled.

The sequence of events which led to the American retreat from Saigon has no clear starting point. The 1968 Tet offensive might be one point, since it caused the halt of continuing U.S. escalation of the war. But the final phase started last January in Phuoc Long Province along the Cambodian border north of Saigon.

What the Communists called "the People's Liberation Armed Forces" (PLAF), and were in fact North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units with some support from troops raised in-side South Vietnam, launched an offensive in Phuoc Long about New Year's Day. They encountered little resistance.

Martin had been arguing that the reduction of U. S. military aid for South Vietnam had so weakened the southern army that it was unable to hold outlying areas. Ford asked Congress in January for a $300 million supplement to the $700 million already appropriated for military aid in the fiscal year ending last June 30.

WHATEVER THE reason for the loss of Phuoc Long — and some observers have argued that it was corruption and a lack of will, rather than a shortage of American aid, which caused the Vietnamese army to fight poorly — the Communists drew important conclusions.

They stepped up the flow of troops and supplies southward, adding to a fighting strength and logistical base that had been built up as part of both sides' violations of the 1973 Paris Agreement. Hanoi decided that it would strike at other provinces on the border of Cambodia, where adjacent regions were being used as NVA staging areas.

An offensive began March 5 in the Central Highlands, which run along the western side of central South Vietnam. Ban Me Thuot fell five days later. In a panicky decision made without considering all its ramifications or consulting the United States, President Thieu decided to shorten his logistical lines and reduce his battlefront by withdrawing troops from the highlands.

Inadequately prepared and incompletely executed, that withdrawal touched off a general collapse in the northern and central regions. On March 26 the psychologically important old imperial capital of Hue fell to the NVA almost without a fight, and on March 29 Communists took over South Vietnam's second-largest city, Danang.

The Communists then decided to finish the war by capturing Saigon, not by negotiating from their new position of strength.

NORTH VIETNAM'S de-

fense minister, Vo Nguyen Giap, and its army chief of staff, Van Tien Dung, published an article in the four main Hanoi publications on June 30 recounting how the final victory was achieved. They made it clear that the Communists had never had any intention of making a deal.

After the collapse in the highlands and the Hue-Da nang area, they wrote, "the time was ripe for our armed forces and people...striking directly at the enemy's last lair in Saigon, completely annihilating the puppet army, totally overthrowing the puppet administration and achieving complete victory

"By late March, when the Hue battle was going to end in victory, we had already officially taken the decision to launch a historic campaign of decisive significance . . .bearing the name of the great President Ho Chi Minh."

This article in effect confirmed that the leadership in Hanoi had always considered Vietnam as one entity, despite the 1954 division of the country, and was in command of both parts while using the PLAF as a fiction to obscure its control. Western analysts have generally felt that the Viet Cong's National Liberation Front (NLF) had a significant southern appeal but was ultimately a creation of the unified leadership of northerners and southerners in Hanoi.

The *Far Eastern Economic Review*, a weekly news magazine published in Hong Kong, carried on Aug. 8 an interview with the chairman of the NLF's central committee presidium, Nguyen Huu Tho. Although he was a figurehead whose insignificance has been emphasized by his invisibility since the fall of Saigon, Tho's account added details.

"BY ABOUT THE beginning of the last week of March, the determination to launch the historic campaign . . .was officially laid down," Tho said. He did not mention who laid it down, since that would have exposed Hanoi's control.

"At that time, we definitely reaffirmed that the total collapse of the puppet army and administration was unavoidable; the United States was completely incapable of rescuing their agents in Saigon," Tho said.

American analysts noted that in early April the NLF's Liberation Radio stopped referring to the Paris Agreement's provision for the establishment of a three-part National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord of Thieu representatives, Communists and so-called neutralists as a transition away from the Thieu regime. The radio had been using Thieu's reluctance to agree to this as a propaganda weapon, but the significance of its being dropped was not appreciated at the time.

In fact, the Communists had decided to abandon a negotiated settlement as an unnecessary encumbrance now that total victory was in sight. The Paris Agreement, which was nibbled to death by both Hanoi and Saigon, had been ignored on one more section.

Within two weeks of the Communist decision, word on it had filtered through to the Central Intelligence Agency's offices on the sixth floor of the U. S. Embassy in Saigon.

THE INFORMATION came from what Americans called the Communists' Central Office for South Vietnam, or COSVN. This was the elusively mobile military and political headquarters for the war in the southern part of South Vietnam which U. S. troops had tried unsuccessfully to capture in the May 1970 invasion of Cambodia.

COSVN was directed by Pham Hung, a member of the politburo of the Lao Dong Party the Communist organization based in Hanoi that rules Vietnam—who outranked even Gen. Giap. Since the fall of Saigon, Pham Hung has emerged as the man in charge of South Vietnam, taking precedence in official lists over Tho and leaders of the apparently powerless Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG).

Contrary to recent congressional testimony about a lack of American intelligence agents inside the Viet Cong apparatus, the CIA received occasional reports from within COSVN. Over the years, these reports had repeatedly been proven accurate.

The first report on the ate-March decision to smash over Saigon was brief. Coming at a time of rapid developments and numerous intelligence reports of varying degrees of reliability, it seems not to have gotten much attention in either the Saigon embassy or in Washington.

A FACTOR contributing to this neglect was the message which the Hungarians and Poles were beginning to whisper in American ears.

When the ICCS was set up in 1973 supposedly to insure respect for the ceasefire agreement, it was generally assumed by Westerners that delegates from the two East European countries would be sympathetic to the Vietnamese Communists while the other two elements, Canadians and Indonesians, would be more neutral or even sympathetic to Saigon's problems. Canada quit the commission when it became impossible to overcome Communist obstruction and do a meaningful supervision job, being replaced by Iran.

With the ICCS moribund, the Hungarians and Poles took on a new role of intermediaries, passing messages between the Communists and Americans. The Hungarians in particular came to be briefed regularly on April's rapid developments by the CIA station chief, Thomas Polgar, who is of Hungarian origin.

This relationship seemed to have developed because of Washington's desire to get word through to the Vietnamese Communists that would avoid any misunderstanding of U. S. intentions. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* quoted an official in Hanoi in another Aug. 8 article as saying, "The question we had to deal with was whether the United States could dispatch troops for the second time."

WHATEVER THE reason, the Hungarians "were being told far more than they (U. S. officials in Saigon) were telling anyone else at that point," according to one source.

The message which the Hungarian and Polish ICCS delegations gave Polgar was that it would be possible to arrange a truce for the purpose of an orderly evacuation of Americans and some South Vietnamese. A safe corridor from Saigon to the South China Sea for the overland movement of refugees to Vung Tau or some other seaport was mentioned

The message also contained or implied — it is not clear which one — that the Communists would negotiate an end of the war with some acceptable administration in Saigon. That meant somone other than Thieu, with the preference settling on Duong Van Minh, the general known from his large stature for a Vietnamese as "Big Minh." He had been a weak and ineffectual South Vietnamese chief of state for 14 months after President Ngo Dinh Diem was overthrown and murdered in November 1963.

The French embassy in Saigon was active behind the scenes at the same time. Ambassador Jean-Marie Merillon was told by his contacts that the Communists were willing to compromise an end to the war with Minh, once Thieu was removed from power. This information supported the Hungarian and Polish message and seemed to confirm it.

The military situation was looking desperate as NVA troops closed in on the Saigon area. On April 10, Ford asked Congress for an emergency allocation of $722 million in arms aid to Saigon, plus $250 million as an "initial" amount of economic and humanitarian aid. This was presented as a possibility of saving South Vietnam, although Kissinger conceded later a lesser goal which he had only implied at the time.

THE COURSE then being pursued, Kissinger said April 29, "was designed to save the Americans still in Vietnam and the maximum number of Vietnamese lives, should the worst come to pass." The prospects for salvaging the military situation even with massive new aid were "somewhat less than 50-50," he added.

But there were hopes of negotiating an orderly ending.

Then on April 17 the CIA received a more detailed account of the late-March decision. A source in COSVN reported that there definitely would not be any truce or negotiations with any governmental entity in Saigon, whether headed by Minh or anyone else.

Instead, the report said, plans were being made to attack Saigon as soon as preparations were completed and to capture it, destroying any semblance of organized opposition to Communist rule. One detail offered to substantiate this was that radar units were being put on Black Virgin Mountain to direct captured American-made planes for an attack on Tan Son Nhut.

Black Virgin Mountain is a volcanic cone that rises 3,235 feet above the Mekong River plain 55 miles north-northwest of Saigon. A site for American communications and radar during the war, it had been captured by NVA troops on Jan. 9.

Within two days after the COSVN report was received, photo reconnaissance had confirmed that radar was being emplaced on the mountain. But despite this and the very high rating given the report's probable reliability, it got a mixed reception in Saigon and Washington.

THE MILITARY reaction was quick.

The U. S. Navy and civilian American vessels had been on alert in the South China Sea since Ford mobilized ships for the evacuation of Danang and other coastal towns at the end of March. A higher stage of alert for an emergency evacuation of Americans from Saigon by helicopter was put into effect April 18 as a result of the new intelligence.

The U. S. aircraft carrier Enterprise sailed into Manila harbor April 18 for an announced five-day visit. It abruptly left a few hours later. The carrier Hancock, which had arrived at Singapore April 16 for a scheduled seven-day visit, also sailed April 18. All over East Asian waters, Navy ships were marshalled for impending collapse in Saigon, with most of them arriving off the South Vietnamese coast between April 19 and 21.

The State Department sent a cable to Ambassador Martin which seems to have been triggered by the intelligence, although this connection cannot be confirmed. It asked him about evacuation plans.

EVERY U. S. embassy in a hazardous situation is supposed to have an up-to-date plan to evacuate embassy personnel and other Americans. But the Saigon plan was out of date and inadequate to the situation in mid-April. Martin had always taken the attitude that Thieu's regime would last indefinitely, and therefore his subordinates — most of them hand-picked for loyalty rather than competence — had not been

pressed to follow State Department regulations on this.

Some administrative divisions of the huge embassy had been asked to turn in lists not only of Americans but also of Vietnamese whose lives might be in danger if the Communists took over and therefore should be evacuated. These were tossed into a box and when the situation finally fell apart they could not be found in the panicky chaos of embasssy administration.

Martin's answer to the State Department's query was that he had no plan to evacuate local Vietnamese employes because there were too many of them and besides an evacuation would induce panic in Saigon, possibly causing Thieu to fall. At the same time, Martin's deputy, Wolfgang J. Lehmann, was telling embasssy division heads at staff meetings that plans were being made to take care of their high-risk employes, for whom many of the other diplomats felt great personal responsibility.

One officer in the embassy says flatly that Martin lied to some embassy personnel about evacuation plans, but others report only evasions.

U. S. Air Force planes were evacuating some persons from Saigon at the time. They were mostly employes of the U. S. Army, while others were waiting for further word from the embassy.

KISSINGER CABLED back after getting Martin's answer, saying it was inadequate. Under pressure from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and other congressional units, the secretary of state asked Martin to speed up the reduction of airplane evacuations so the number of persons who might need to be lifted out by helicopter would be manageable.

But Martin felt no great urgency. On the basis of the Hungarian and Polish message, he did not think a helicopter lift would be necessary.

The evaluation in Washington was complex. Every morning a number of groups met around town to review the latest developments, and late every afternoon a meeting was convened at the State Department. Chaired by Philip C. Habib, assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, it was attended most of the time by Kissinger's No. 2 man, Deputy Secretary Robert S. Ingersoll.

Representatives of State, the National Security Council, the Pentagon, the CIA and other branches of government met with Habib to try to make plans. But they were almost overwhelmed by the mass of sometimes conflicting and often confusion reports, according to one participant in the meetings.

Commenting on the April 17 report from COSVN, this source said that the CIA usually failed to indicate clearly which reports out of a mass of intelligence deserved more credence than others. A desire to protect CIA agents obscured the fact that this particular report came directly from COSVN, the source added.

APPARENTLY reflecting the intelligence, Ford said in an interview April 21 that he had the impression in the previous few days that Hanoi was seeking a quick military takeover, but there was "no way to tell what the North Vietnamese will do." He noted that a lull in fighting had set in around Saigon earlier that day.

This turned out to be a five-day lull, beginning as Martin, Polgar and the French ambasssador, Merillon, finally convinced Thieu that he should resign for the good of South Vietnam. The lull seemed to substantiate the Hungarian and Polish message of an evacuation truce, but evacuation went ahead only fairly slowly while high-risk Vietnamese remained in their jobs.

Officials here decided that, because of the conflict between intelligence and diplomatic reports, the possibility of an arranged end needed to be checked with North Vietnam. The Soviet Union was asked to inquire in Hanoi.